

Jews in the Warsaw Uprising

“You are free!” – were the first words spoken late in the afternoon of 1 August, 1944 by a young Pole with a „white and red armband and a rifle in his hand.” Not much earlier, Kedyw Kollegium „A” unit of the Home Army (AK) took over the Umschlagplatz area. There were a few dozen Jews from different European countries there.”

The most numerous group came from Hungary, Polish Jews were also present. They had been doing slave work under the supervision of SS-men. The latter, just as an insurgent unit started to get closer to Stawki Street, escaped in panic. “Am I really free?” – one of the prisoners present there, Chaim Icel Goldstein, asked himself. He had not been aware yet of the nature of the events. He could be certain of one thing – he was a witness of the Polish insurrection against the Germans. The commander of Kedyw recalled the reaction of the “young people in striped prison garments” in the following way: “The freed people began to show us gratitude in all possible ways.” A member of the elite AK unit that liberated the Umschlagplatz on that day was a young non-commissioned officer of Jewish origin, Stanisław Witold Aronson, pseud. “Rysiek”.

Since the beginning of the insurgent fighting the AK command was aiming at gaining control over Warsaw’s key areas. One of the aims of the actions was reaching the Old Town. On the way to the Old Town, in the area from Gęsia and Zamenhofa streets to Okopowa Street – on the ruins of the ghetto – the KL Warschau concentration camp, the so-called “Gęsiówka” was located. In the middle of the first ten days of August there was around one thousand people imprisoned in the “Gęsiówka”. Among them there was a numerous group composed of Jews from France, Hungary, Greece, and Poland. On that day – 5 August – the “Zośka” battalion composed of young people associated with the “Gray Ranks” (clandestine Polish Scouting and Guiding Association), captured two German tanks. Being in possession of such equipment the insurgents broke through the walls that surrounded the old ghetto area. The camp’s prisoners were liberated. The commander of “Zośka” captain Ryszard Białous, aka “Jerzy” recalled what was happening in the first minutes since the camp was taken over: “The barracks’ doors open under pressure, and the

whole foreground fills with a mass of striped figures running in our direction with an incredible scream and waving of hands. For a moment I feel my throat clenching the contraction of joy that we made it in time". One of the 348 Jews liberated that day was a Polish non-commissioned officer, Henryk Lederman, pseud. "Heniek". Right after the liberation, he undertook to create a unit of several people, which included Jews. Soon afterwards he met with lieutenant Waclaw Micuta, aka "Wacek", he saluted him and reported: "Lieutenant! Junior Officer Henryk Lederman presents the Jewish Battalion now ready to fight."

With the striking of the "W" Hour, euphoria filled the streets of Warsaw. "We were marching from the Umschlagplatz," Aronson recalled – "Thousands of people lined the streets, tossing flowers and weeping". Michael Zylberberg in his "Warsaw Diary" wrote about what was happening after the outbreak of the uprising: "The streets were crowded. Polish national flags, draped over balconies and hanging out of windows, spread the joy of freedom that would last forever." The mood that prevailed among Jews is best reflected in the words of Goldstein: "The Jews were rediscovering their human pride." Such value as hope in the first days of August 1944 prompted many to take active part in the fighting. Jews as well, although only few had survived. Out of approximately 750 thousand inhabitants of the then Warsaw, the "invisible" Jews – remaining in hiding, in the ruins of the ghetto or on the "Aryan side" – constituted a small group, numbering (estimate) from a dozen or so to not more than 40 thousand people. So, they were unable to play any role in the insurgent struggle. However, they welcomed the news about the uprising as emotionally as the Poles. Icchak Cukierman, aka "Antek" admitted straightforwardly: "We expected an uprising".

On August 3, an appeal to the Jewish population issued by the Jewish Combat Organization [ŻOB] appeared in the insurgent "Information Bulletin": "We stand today together with the whole Polish nation in the fight for freedom. We call upon all ŻOB militants who are still alive and all the Jewish youth capable to fight, to continue the resistance and the battle, from which no one can stand away. (...) Through fighting until victory, to a free, independent, strong, and just Poland." Two weeks later, the fighting Bundists directed to Dr Emanuel Szerer, the party's representative to the Government of the Republic of Poland in London, in which the uprising was mentioned: "For 18 days, the people of Warsaw have been fighting unequally with the

barbarian invader, and the surviving young Jewish element is fighting along with all of Warsaw. We are fighting against the enemy for our common Polish cause". On the one hand, this attitude of the Jews towards the Polish insurrection was a proof of their deeply rooted patriotism and dedication to the cause of their homeland – Poland, on the other, it was proof of the determination of all who were able and wanted by all means to participate in the fight against the German occupant.

At least in part, it was a form of "settling old scores" for all past wrongdoings. Therefore, some joined the ranks of the Home Army, while others joined the People's Army. ŻOB fighters took part in direct combat, others worked in auxiliary services. Everyone was united by a common idea" Cukierman justified it in the following way: "We were not a decision-making force. We were not even an important force. There was only a few dozen of us. But from a moral point of view it was important to us: we were proud of the very fact that we joined the uprising."

Jakub Celemenski wanted to fight: "It's time to translate suppressed hatred into action." Bund member, Bernard Goldstein, an eyewitness of the events, wrote about the acts of his confreres: "They gave their best in the fight for the city. They fought fiercely, afraid that a moment of rest would deprive them of the possibility of attacking the enemy. They had so many scores to settle. They undertook desperate acts putting their lives at danger in order to be able to get closer to the Germans." Marian Igra, a sniper serving in the ranks of the Home Army most bluntly justified his participation in the fighting, explaining: "When I killed, I would say: »this is for my father, this is for my mother, this is for my brother«. When I had this opportunity, could someone say to me: »You have no right to kill a man«? I had a full right to do this. For me it was not only a duty as a soldier towards my country, but also a duty of a Jew to destroy... the enemies of civilization".

Minna Aspler and Lusja Hornstein were couriers. The former recalled: "I felt I had nothing to lose. I lost my family; I was alone and I had no future ahead of me". The latter would also take care of the wounded. Alicja Zipper served as a liaison officer for Gen. Antoni Chruściel, aka "Monter". Maria Censor exercised the same function: "I would carry weapons – in a shopping basket, under my clothes, I even hid a small gun in a straw hat. If someone caught me, I was ready to fight". Dawid Fogielman, a liberated prisoner of the "Gęsiówka", treated his service as a personal duty:

“We enlisted with the AK. They didn’t give us weapons because they didn’t have any. We carried out auxiliary works”. Benjamin Mandelkern would erect barricades: “We smashed pavements with bare hands and put cement blocks along the pavements. It was amazing how much effort everyone put into it.”

All those who were able to take part in the fight did so to the best of their abilities and objective conditions. In the “Information Bulletin” under the date of 18 August it was written: “In the ranks of the AK also soldiers – Jews are fighting. Their number is relatively small in light of the almost total extermination of Polish Jews by the Germans”. Cukierman – rather subjectively – recalled how the fighting Poles perceived the Jews’ participation in the uprising: “The AL admired us; the AK was friendly to us. We were on the barricades with them”. While the words contained in the “IB” can be treated as a confirmation of the fact, the words of the ŻOB commander raise doubts.

Many Jews taking part in the insurgent fighting perceived reality in another way. The fact that the insurgents’ chances were few and the national liberation insurrection was condemned to defeat was already known a few days after the uprising broke out. There was no direct help from the outside – from both the Soviet army and the Allied forces. The insurgent forces grew weaker and weaker day after day. Hundreds of insurgents died and those who died in their thousands were above all the civilians. In particular the latter – against their own will – became the victims of their countrymen’s heroism. The course of the actions was very dynamic. It was not long before people’s moods began to change radically. Everyone – insurgents and civilians, Poles and Jews – gave in to despair. Proportionally to that, the place of euphoria had been replaced by fear of the near future and resentment. Polish courage and sacrifice lost to a better organised and well-armed opponent. Therefore, after a week, one of the threads appearing in public circulation were – especially among Polish civilians – accusations of erroneous decisions in tandem with pointing to those responsible for the tragedy taking place in front of witnesses and victims at the same time.

“A Jew had become the scapegoat”, said Celemenski and he quoted the overheard statements of the Poles: “Jews brought the war”, “Jews started the uprising”, “Jews halted the Bolsheviks from coming with help.” Numerous Jewish accounts spoke of allegations made by Poles against

Jews. Starting with the allegation that they were “Gestapo agents” or “German spies” (such “voice of the street” is recalled by i.a. Marek Edelman, Pnina Grynszpan-Frymer, Władka Meed, Marian Berland, Samuel Willenberg, and Bernard Goldstein), to such an absurd ascertainment: “Since they [the Jews] survived, they had to collaborate”. Such rumours were at least in part an offshoot of the way the insurgents treated the Jews – how different from the one that Cukierman talked about. From the beginning, the Home Army command kept a large distance to the “Jewish cause”. On the one hand, it was aware of the dangers that could arise as a consequence of the revealing of the saved Jews and tried to protect them: “The issue of the attitude of the Polish population to the Jews may take on wider and sensitive forms” (correspondence of the civil delegation with the District AK). Gen. Tadeusz Pełczyński, aka “Grzegorz” asked the commander of the Home Army’s Warsaw District, Colonel A. Chruściel, for directions on the treatment of the liberated Jews – not only Polish citizens, but also those from other countries: “The troops should be given directions that would exclude any possible excesses against Jews.” On the other hand, in the actions of the command there were also signs of indifference, if not reluctance to the Jews. The remarks of the Jewish activists prove that. A representative of the ŻOB, Cywia Lubetkin, gave a proposal of the Jews’ participation in the fighting on behalf of her comrades. “We were received indifferently, coldly. They said that the command would think about it, investigate the matter, and communicate with us”. Symcha Rotem recalled: “We had known that the AK had a bad attitude towards the Jews”. Jewish fighters were “pushed” into the arms of the People’s Army – not because of their (alleged) sympathy for communist ideology, but because of the Home Army command’s attitude towards them.

In their memories, many Jews highlighted that during the uprising they did not come across any hostile attitudes of their Polish brothers-in-arms (including Moszka Gajsta, Gerszon Edelman, Artur Ney, and Efraim Krasucki). Only few of those who were fighting, would admit to their origin. However, most of the people who joined the AK – for their own safety – did so under assumed surnames. Zipper saw “in the AK many Jewish faces” of those who passed off as Poles. Whereas, Mandelkern acknowledged: “We sensed each other as Jews, but we would never talk about it with one another or with any third parties”.

They were afraid to speak of their identity and their concerns were justified. Under the insurgent

banner individuals were hiding who were more or less openly showing their dislike or even hostility towards the Jews. There are known cases of battery and robbery of the remnants of property from surviving Jewish civilians. Celemenski saw how “Polish hooligans were beating a shabby clothed young girl” and a religious old man. When the identity of some of the Jewish insurgents was revealed they were threatened with death. Such was the case of Goldstein whose life was only saved when the troop’s commander intervened. Willenberg and Igra, for instance, also managed to survive. The former recalled: “I couldn’t believe that my colleagues who were shedding blood with me, after all we had gone through together, after all the fights that we had together, wanted to kill me for being a Jew.” He survived thanks to a warning from a Jewess he had known. It was similar in the latter’s case. When he learnt about the danger, he left the troop in which he had been serving up until then.

Several cases of murders of Jews by Polish insurgents have been reported. The most tragic in its dimension was the mass murder committed on 11 September at 4 Prosta Street. At that time, AK soldiers under the command of captain Waclaw Stykowski, aka “Hal” took the lives of a dozen or so Jewish civilians, mainly women and children. The motives behind this crime are unknown. One was certain – the Jewish origin of the defenceless victims. Mandelkern wrote about another murder committed in the ranks of the AK: “One of the members of a group in which a Jew had been the day before said with satisfaction: »Moyshe will not come with us today or ever again. We took care of him. He is extremely flammable«. How did it happen that these »patriots« killed a man in a savage way whose only guilt had been that he was a Jew?” Jewish prisoners also fell victim. “There was a tragic incident in the Gęsiówka,” as Anlen noted, “the insurgents shot three German Jews who were mistaken for SS-men dressed in striped prison garments.” Goldstein wrote about this event, showing different reasons for the acts committed by the insurgents. In his account, the perpetrators were supposed to shout: “Shoot them all! We don’t want Jews here”. Can such acts committed by Polish soldiers be generalised? Absolutely no. Because they were committed by demoralised individuals. And the Poles as a mass – insurgents and civilians – were occupied with something else: fighting for the liberation of their homeland. It should not be surprising that, although many Jews fought for this homeland, they did it primarily as Poles. And as Poles – like Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński – they died...

After 63 days, on October 3, 1944, the Warsaw Uprising – an armed outbreak organised by the Home Army as part of Operation Tempest – came to an end. It ended in defeat. It was a tragedy both for the Polish and Jewish nation that resisted the German occupant. For the handful of Jews, it was a double tragedy since it meant a repeated danger. The return of the occupant meant imminent death. The fighting Poles – in accordance with war law – became prisoners of war, the civilians were sent to the transit camp in Piotrków. Not all had such chances – such laws did not include the Jews. “Decisions have already been made that we will surrender and the insurgents will go into captivity – Goldstein wrote – “But not the Jews. Because the Germans would kill the Jews on the spot”. Only few – as Polish insurgents – were taken into captivity. Many went to the camp. The choice, chances of survival were determined by the appearance, documents, assumed surname, and ability to speak Polish. And the awareness that they could be recognised and handed over to the occupant. That is why the majority of the Jews decided to stay in Warsaw – “return” to the hideouts, cellars, and bunkers. They felt safer there. And they hoped that they would survive.

In the underground press only twice, there was information about the Jews’ participation in the insurgent fighting. There was no mention of the fact that several months earlier the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising broke out, that it was the Jews who were the first to have the courage and take the fight against the Germans. And they died. However, they were aware that they were doomed to death. And so, they chose death with honour – of their own will. Did such a fate have to befall two hundred thousand Poles? The question remains open. Just as open should be the memory of Poles’ history – both worthy of praise and infamous. And about the Jews’ participation in the Warsaw Uprising.

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